

## Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2003 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

---

### Recommended Citation

"Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West." *The Annals of Iowa* 62 (2003), 481-482.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10745>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

*Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West*, by David M. Wrobel. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. ix, 322 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.

Reviewer Paula M. Nelson is professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. She is the author of *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900-1917* (1986) and *The Prairie Winnows Out Its Own: The West River Country of South Dakota in the Years of Depression and Dust* (1996).

One of the most divisive arguments in the study of American history in recent years has been the debate over the stories, meanings, and myths of the frontier experience in the West. There has been very little middle ground, although David Wrobel tries to find some in his new book, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West*. Wrobel analyzes the promotional materials disseminated about the vast segment of the United States between the eastern edge of the Great Plains and the Pacific, from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s. Then he surveys the reminiscences the pioneers wrote about their experiences settling that space in that time. His goal? To explore "the contours of the western promotional and reminiscences genres and the ways in which those genres diverged at times and intersected at others" (16). Key to his argument is the idea that memoirists wrote their stories with the same level of intent that boosters employed to sell space and place in the West, and that both genres helped create the image and identity of the West over time. His analysis of the memoirs rests upon sociological theories of memory, which have themes of group power or its loss at their core. Although Wrobel rejects the idea that pioneer memoirists held "hegemonic control" (13) over their societies—hence the "middle ground" mentioned earlier—he believes that they wrote as they did to try to enhance their declining status in the newer West that was rapidly leaving them behind.

Wrobel's research is truly impressive. The notes and bibliography are packed with hundreds of primary and secondary sources. His conclusions throughout, however, reflect the problems inherent in "social science" approaches to the past. History, as one of the foundation disciplines of the liberal arts, has a foot in the camps of both social sciences and humanities. The social sciences tend to be interested in power: who has it, how do they hold it, who is hurt by it, who should really have it, why they do not have it, and how the disadvantaged could win some. Their subjects are almost always antagonistic groups. Humanists certainly study groups as well, but they tend to begin their work with the individual human heart adrift in the human condition and facing the specter that ultimately all face: mortality. Wrobel's book, if written from

the humanist perspective, would better understand the context within which booster literature was written and consumed. It would also grant pioneer memoirists some humanity. Their reminiscences are more than pinched, narrow didacticism designed to preach musty truths to the young in order to enhance and preserve their own power and status. The pioneers were actors in a tremendous human drama. They have stories to tell us—stories that can educate, inspire, or warn. Memoirists stand as witnesses to what went before; over time they use their human faculties to assess, analyze, and understand their own experiences as well as the larger picture of which they are a part. To understand them this way does not preclude harsh judgments of their actions and justifications when such judgments are warranted. It does, however, require some sense of identification with them as fellow human beings, and some acknowledgment that all human beings, in all times and places, are a complex mixture of good and bad.

Many scholars will like Wrobel's book, and everyone interested in questions of identity and myth in the West should read it. The author does try to be fair, in ways that other social science-oriented scholars sometimes do not, by pointing out "a diversity of opinion" (180) on race among the pioneers and by cautioning against one-dimensional thinking about the past. May his efforts start a trend.

*Kansas and the West: New Perspectives*, edited by Rita Napier. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003. viii, 424 pages. Illustrations, index. \$40.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Michael Steiner is associate professor of history at Northwest Missouri State University, specializing in nineteenth-century American social history.

*Kansas and the West* is a collection of essays on Kansas history drawing on topics that fall outside the "traditional" history of the West. Through the collection and editorial introductions, the editor intends to demonstrate the complexity of human life and relations in a frontier that is traditionally simplified into the "Wild West" of popular lore.

Napier introduces the collection with an overview, published first as an essay in *Kansas History*, of the themes that recent scholarship has elevated in reassessing the contours of Kansas history. The book then conveniently packages the full text of significant articles used to construct her thesis that traditional histories (those published before 1970) left out a lot of marginalized people. These essays are grouped into three roughly chronological periods that suggest some unifying themes.

Part one focuses on the convergence of diverse Euro-American people with Native Americans. The most distinctive piece here is Elliott

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.